

The U.S.'s \$42.5 Billion High-Speed Internet Plan Hits a Snag: A Worker Shortage; Shortage of fiber technicians casts doubt on the White House goal to bring fast internet to every home this decade

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FULL TEXT

The federal government is missing a crucial link in its plan to greatly expand access to high-speed internet service in rural America: enough workers to get the job done.

Fiber splicers—the workers who install, maintain and repair wired broadband networks—are in short supply. "We're running around like chickens with our heads cut off," says Jason Jolly, chief executive of Fiberscope LLC, a Sullivan, Mo.-based company that does contracted fiber-splicing work. Mr. Jolly says his five-person crew has been "getting nonstop calls for the last two months."

And that's before the money starts flowing from the government's \$42.5 billion broadband spending package. The industry is bracing for that spending to start flooding the market as soon as this year.

"As soon as everyone gets rolling on these projects, the supply chain is just going to get worse and the workforce is going to get slim," says Jimmy Lewis, co-founder of Cajun Broadband, an internet provider that serves more than 2,000 homes in south-central Louisiana.

The result could be a worsening of the delays and cost inflation that already are plaguing wired-internet providers' network-expansion projects, industry analysts and executives say. That raises questions about whether the new federal spending will be enough to end the so-called digital divide by the Biden administration's target of 2030, or even at all.

Millions are waiting

Millions of U.S. households still don't have access to fixed broadband, according to the Federal Communications Commission. Advocates say getting them connected will let residents participate in remote work and school, start businesses from home, connect virtually with doctors and have all kinds of other benefits.

Mike Stacy, a former coal miner and current city council member in Elkhorn City, Ky., says his town has been losing residents because of the lack of fast internet. The town's economy used to be powered by coal-mining jobs, he says, but the only good-paying jobs left now are at the hospital. His wife, he says, was offered a work-from-home job that paid well, but she couldn't take it because their home internet is too slow.

Cellphone companies could help by providing wireless internet service to more homes, and they could benefit from the new subsidies. States can use the federal money for other forms of internet connection in areas where expanding fiber networks is deemed too costly. If labor costs continue to rise, more money is expected to flow to 5G wireless service, analysts say.

"There are limited dollars, so we have to make choices," says Andrew Butcher, president of the Maine Connectivity Authority. "If labor access is prohibitive or even if just geographic conditions are prohibitive, we absolutely are going to need to evaluate how to deploy alternative solutions."

But wireless internet has lower capacity than fiber connections, a drawback that critics say will become more important as Americans' data use continues to grow. So while wireless service can help address the current labor challenges in some cases, it may not be the ideal broadband solution.

Fiber-optic internet wired directly to homes, though labor intensive and costly to build, has become America's favorite way to get online because it lets users upload data as quickly as they can download. That eliminates lag during video calls, online gaming and other activities that became more widely adopted during the pandemic.

Shrinking the gap
At the current pace of hiring, the U.S. broadband workforce of some 478,000 won't be enough to meet the government's timeline, analysts and executives say.

The Fiber Broadband Association, an industry group promoting network expansion, estimates that more than 205,000 additional workers will be needed through 2026. Other estimates for how many more fiber workers will be needed this decade have run as high as 850,000. But Nell Geiser, research director at the Communications Workers of America, says some of those figures are "unsubstantiated." The Government Accountability Office estimates that some 34,000 additional workers could be needed this year to support the government's broadband-expansion programs, though that estimate could vary depending on the timing of certain projects. Ms. Geiser says that figure is "much more realistic."

Whatever the actual numbers are, the expected surge in demand for fiber splicers has the fiber industry and government offices racing to get ahead of the labor challenges. Equipment manufacturers are making simpler fiber products that are easier to install, companies are teaming up to offer training programs and governments are adding fiber-technician certifications in state and community colleges.

Among the more notable efforts, fiber-optic cable manufacturer Corning Inc. has joined with industry giant AT&T Inc. as well as the Wireless Infrastructure Association on training and apprenticeship programs for fiber technicians. One broadband executive is even tapping his children's high school to train the next generation of workers. Dan Sivils, chief operating officer of internet provider IsoFusion, says he helped establish a career and technical-education program focused on fiber-splicing skills to start in the 2024-25 school year at his children's high school, the White River School District outside of Seattle. Fiber-network operator GigabitNow, a unit of IsoFusion, plans to recruit from the program and further train graduates.

Meanwhile, some companies are taking steps to lock in workers now for expansion projects that are expected to benefit from the federal funding.

Edinburg, Va.-based Shenandoah Telecommunications Co. is moving more of its fiber-splicing work in-house to protect against delays from labor shortages, Chief Operating Officer Ed McKay says. The company now does about 25% of its fiber-splicing work in-house, he says, whereas nearly all of it was done by contractors before last year. Mattoon, Ill.-based Consolidated Communications Holdings Inc., which has hundreds of employees with long experience working on copper wirelines, is working to retrain its staff. Already, some 30% of its 1,100 field technicians have been trained to work with fiber, operations chief Gabe Waggoner says. Within the next two years, the company expects to have at least half its field technicians retrained, he says. The company also relies on regional contractors to support its build-out.

Further up the supply chain, equipment manufacturers like Clearfield Inc. are trying to make simpler products to reduce the need for labor. Clearfield CEO Cheri Beranek says the company's products, like its preconnectorized drop cables, can reduce fiber-splicing needs by 40%. Preconnectorized cables, often called a plug-and-play solution, minimize the need for in-field splicing.

Bonuses are available

Despite industry efforts like these, the current fiber workforce is struggling to keep up with demand. Jamie Barton, senior vice president of global human resources and labor relations at AT&T, says the company has about 2,000 openings for installation technicians, more than usual. She says the company has been offering hiring bonuses, sometimes of up to \$5,000 in tight markets like Texas, and referral bonuses of up to \$2,000 to recruit workers.

Brock Nichols, a one-man fiber-splicing contractor who has been working on a project in Arkansas since 2021, says he gets calls at least twice a week asking him if he's available for other projects.

"It's more than I can possibly do," he says. "Right now, you could just about stand back with a dart and throw it at the United States and find work in that area. There's so, so much going on."

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